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CHAPTER ONE

THE GULF IS FIXED

BEFORE THE CHASM

The present chasm between the generations has been brought about almost entirely by a change in the concept of truth.

Wherever you look today, the new concept holds the field. The consensus about us is almost monolithic, whether you review the arts, literature or simply read the newspapers and magazines such as *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, *The Listener* or *The Observer*. On every side you can feel the stranglehold of this new methodology—and by “methodology” we mean the way we approach truth and knowing. It is like suffocating in a particularly bad London fog. And just as fog cannot be kept out by walls or doors, so this consensus comes in around us, until the room we live in is no longer unpolluted, and yet we hardly realize what has happened.

The tragedy of our situation today is that men and women are being fundamentally affected by the new way of looking at truth, and yet they have never even analyzed the drift which has taken place. Young people from Christian homes are brought up in the old framework of truth. Then they are subjected to the modern framework. In time they become confused because they do not understand the alternatives with which they are being presented. Confusion becomes bewilderment, and before long they are overwhelmed. This is unhappily true not only of young people, but of many pastors, Christian educators, evangelists and missionaries as well.

So this change in the concept of the way we come to knowledge and truth is the most crucial problem, as I understand it, facing Christianity today.

If you had lived in Europe, let us say prior to about 1890, or in the United States before about 1935, you would not have had to spend much time, in practice, in thinking about your presuppositions. (These dates are arbitrary as the change came, in Europe at least, fairly gradually. In America the crucial years of change were from 1913 to 1940, and during these relatively few years the whole way of thinking underwent a revolution; 1913 was a most important year in the United States, not because it was the year before the First World War, but for another highly significant reason, as we shall see later.)

Before these dates everyone would have been working on much the same presuppositions, which in practice seemed to accord with the Christian's own presuppositions. This was true both in the area of epistemology and methodology. *Epistemology* is the theory of how we know, or how we can be sure that what we think we know of the world about us is correct. *Methodology* is how we approach the question of truth and knowing.

Now it may be argued that the non-Christians had no right to act on the presuppositions they acted on. That is true. They were being romantic in accepting optimistic answers without a sufficient base. Nevertheless they went on thinking and acting as if these presuppositions were true.

What were these presuppositions? The basic one was that there really are such things as absolutes. They accepted the possibility of an absolute in the area of Being (or *knowledge*), and in the area of *morals*. Therefore, because they accepted the possibility of absolutes, though people might have disagreed as to what these were, nevertheless they could reason together on the classical basis of antithesis. They took it for granted that if anything was true, the opposite was false. In morality, if one thing was right, its opposite was wrong. This little formula, "A is A" and "If you have A, it is not non-A," is the first move in classical logic. If you understand the extent to which this no longer holds sway, you will understand our present situation.

Absolutes imply antithesis. The non-Christian went on romantically operating on this basis without a sufficient cause, an adequate base, for doing so. Thus it was still possible to discuss what was right and wrong,

what was true and false. One could tell a non-Christian to “be a good girl” and, while she might not have followed your advice, at least she would have understood what you were talking about. To say the same thing to a truly modern girl today would be to make a “nonsense” statement. The blank look you might receive would not mean that your standards had been rejected, but that your message was meaningless.

The shift has been tremendous. Thirty or more years ago you could have said such things as “This is true” or “This is right,” and you would have been on everybody’s wavelength. People may or may not have thought out their beliefs consistently, but everyone would have been talking to each other as though the idea of antithesis was correct. Thus in evangelism, in spiritual matters and in Christian education, you could have begun with the certainty that your audience understood you.

PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS WOULD HAVE STOPPED THE DECAY

It was indeed unfortunate that our Christian “thinkers,” in the time before the shift took place and the chasm was fixed, did not teach and preach with a clear grasp of presuppositions.¹ Had they done this they would not have been taken by surprise, and they could have helped young people to face their difficulties. The really foolish thing is that even now, years after the shift is complete, many Christians still do not know what is happening. And this is because they are still not being taught the importance of thinking in terms of presuppositions, especially concerning truth.

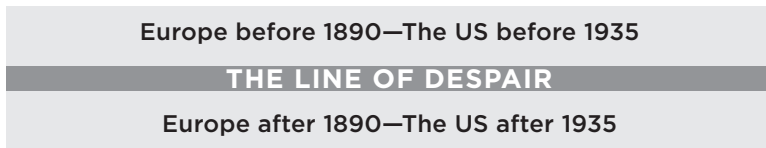
The floodwaters of secular thought and liberal theology overwhelmed the church because the leaders did not understand the importance of combating a false set of presuppositions. They largely fought the battle on the wrong ground and so, instead of being ahead in both defense and communication, they lagged woefully behind. This was a real weakness which it is hard, even today, to rectify among evangelicals.

The use of classical apologetics before this shift took place was effective only because non-Christians were functioning, on the surface, on the same presuppositions, even if they had an inadequate base for them. In classical apologetics though, presuppositions were rarely analyzed, discussed or taken into account.

So if a man got up to preach the gospel and said, “Believe this, it is true,” those who heard would have said, “Well, if that is so, then its opposite is false.” The presupposition of antithesis pervaded men’s entire mental outlook. We must not forget that historic Christianity stands on a basis of antithesis. Without it historic Christianity is meaningless. The basic antithesis is that God objectively exists in contrast (in antithesis) to his not existing. Which of these two are the reality, changes everything in the area of knowledge and morals and in the whole of life.

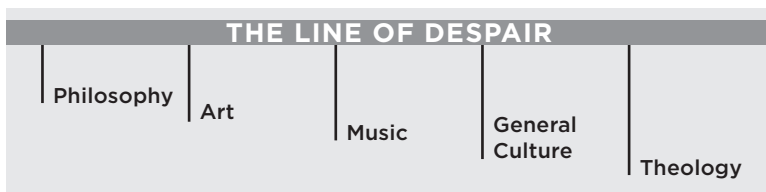
THE LINE OF DESPAIR

Thus we have a date line like this:



Notice that I call the line, the line of despair. Above this line we find men living with their romantic notions of absolutes (though with no sufficient logical basis). This side of the line, all is changed. Man thinks differently concerning truth.

In order to understand this line of despair more clearly, think of it not as a simple horizontal line but as a staircase:



Each of the steps represents a certain stage in time. The higher is earlier, the lower later. It was in this order that the shift in truth affected men’s lives.

The shift spread gradually, and in three different ways. People did not suddenly wake up one morning and find that it had permeated everywhere at once.

First of all it spread geographically. The ideas began in Germany and spread outward. They affected the Continent first, then crossed the

Channel to England, and then the Atlantic to America. Second, it spread through society, from the real intellectual to the more educated, down to the workers, reaching the middle class last of all. Third, it spread as represented in the diagram, from one discipline to another, beginning with the philosophers and ending with the theologians. Theology has been last for a long time. It is curious to me, in studying this whole cultural drift, that so many pick up the latest theological fashion and hail it as something new. *But in fact, what the new theology is now saying has already been said previously in each of the other disciplines.*

It is important to grasp the fundamental nature of this line. If Christians try to talk to people as though they were above the line when in reality they are this side of it, we will only beat the air. This goes as much for dockers as for intellectuals. The same holds true for the concept of spirituality. This side of the line, “spirituality” becomes exactly opposite to Christian spirituality.

UNITY AND DISUNITY IN RATIONALISM

There is a real unity in non-Christian thought, as well as differences within that unity. The shift to moving below the line of despair is one of the differences within the unity of non-Christian thought. The unifying factor can be called rationalism, or if you prefer, humanism—though if we use the latter term, we must be careful to distinguish its meaning in this context from the more limited sense of the word *humanism* in such a book as *The Humanist Frame*,² edited by Sir Julian Huxley. This latter kind of humanism has become a technical term within the larger meaning of the word. Humanism in the larger, more inclusive sense is the system whereby men and women, beginning absolutely by themselves, try rationally to build out from themselves, having only Man as their integration point, to find all knowledge, meaning and value. We must also ensure that the word *rationalism*, which means the same thing as humanism in the wider sense, is not confused with the word *rational*. *Rational* means that the things which are about us are not contrary to reason; or, to put it another way, man’s aspiration of reason is valid. And so the Judeo-Christian position is rational, but it is the very antithesis of rationalism.

So rationalism or humanism is the unity within non-Christian thought. Yet if Christians are going to be able to understand and talk to people in their generation, they must take account of the form rationalism is currently taking. In one way it is always the same—people trying to build from themselves alone. In another sense it is constantly shifting, with different emphases with which a Christian must be acquainted if he is not equipping himself to work in a period which no longer exists.

The line of despair indicates a titanic shift at this present time within the unity of rationalism. Above the line, people were rationalistic optimists. They believed they could begin with themselves and draw a circle which would encompass all thoughts of life and life itself without having to depart from the logic of antithesis. They thought that on their own, rationalistically, finite people could find a unity within the total diversity—an adequate explanation for the whole of reality. This is where philosophy stood prior to our own era. The only real argument between these rationalistic optimists concerned what circle should be drawn. One person would draw a circle and say, “You can live within this circle.” The next person would cross it out and would draw a different circle. The next person would come along and, crossing out the previous circle, draw his own—*ad infinitum*. So if you start to study philosophy by pursuing the *history* of philosophy, by the time you are through with all these circles, each one of which has been destroyed by the next, you may feel like jumping off London Bridge!

But at a certain point this attempt to spin out a *unified* optimistic humanism came to an end. The philosophers came to the conclusion that they were not going to find a unified rationalistic circle that would contain all thought, and in which they could live. It was as though the rationalist suddenly realized that he was trapped in a large round room with no doors and no windows, nothing but complete darkness. From the middle of the room he would feel his way to the walls and begin to look for an exit. He would go round the circumference, and then the terrifying truth would dawn on him that there was no exit, no exit at all! *In the end the philosophers came to the realization that they could not find this unified rationalistic circle and so, departing from the classical*

methodology of antithesis, they shifted the concept of truth, and modern man was born.

In this way modern man moved under the line of despair. He was driven to it against his desire. He remained a rationalist, but he had changed. Do we Christians understand this shift in the contemporary world? If we do not understand it, then we are largely talking to ourselves.

TENDENCY TOWARDS A UNIFORM CULTURE

The importance of understanding the chasm to which man's thinking has brought him is not of intellectual value alone but of spiritual value as well. The Christian is to resist the spirit of the world. But when we say this, we must understand that the world-spirit does not always take the same form. So the Christian must resist the spirit of the world *in the form it takes in his own generation*. If he does not do this, he is not resisting the spirit of the world at all. This is especially so for our generation, as the forces at work against us are of such a total nature. It is our generation of Christians more than any other who need to heed these words attributed to Martin Luther:

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.

It would be false to say that there is a totally uniform culture. This is not so. And yet as we study the art and literature of the past and those things which help us to understand a culture, we find that there tends to be a drift towards a monolithic and uniform whole.

Through a study of archaeology it is possible to show how a certain idea developed in one place and then over a period of several hundred years spread over wide areas. One could give as an example the Indo-European culture, whose spread can be traced through the flow of certain words.

In the distant past it took so long for cultural concepts to spread that by the time they had reached other areas they had sometimes already changed at their place of origin. But today the world is small, and it is very possible to have a monolithic culture spreading rapidly and influencing great sections of mankind. No artificial barriers, such as the Iron Curtain, can keep out the flow of these ideas. As the world has shrunk, and as it has largely become post-Christian, both sides of the Iron Curtain have followed the same methodology and the same basic monolithic thought-form—namely, the lack of absolutes and antithesis, leading to pragmatic relativism.

In our modern forms of specialized education there is a tendency to lose the whole in the parts, and in this sense we can say that our generation produces few truly educated people. True education means thinking by associating across the various disciplines, and not just being highly qualified in one field, as a technician might be. I suppose no discipline has tended to think more in fragmented fashion than the orthodox or evangelical theology of today.

Those standing in the stream of historic Christianity have been especially slow to understand the relationships between various areas of thought. When the apostle warned us to “keep [ourselves] unspotted from the world,”³ he was not talking of some abstraction. If the Christian is to apply this injunction to himself he must understand what confronts him antagonistically in his own moment of history. Otherwise he simply becomes a useless museum piece and not a living warrior for Jesus Christ.

The orthodox Christian has paid a very heavy price, both in the defense and communication of the gospel, for his failure to think and act as an educated person understanding and at war with the uniformity of our modern culture.

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